January 13, 2017
1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fisheries Division
Region 4 Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Judith Basin Conservation District
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
John and Mikell Bodner

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Enclosed is an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward a habitat restoration project on Williams Creek, a tributary to Big Otter Creek near Raynesford in Judith Basin County.

Please submit any comments by 11:59 PM on February 12, 2017 to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at the address listed above. The funding for this project through the FFIP is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish & Wildlife Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
Habitat Bureau
Fisheries Division
e-mail: mmcgree@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Williams Creek riparian fencing

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted sections 87-1-272 through 273, MCA that direct Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The program involves providing funding for physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purpose of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established an earmarked funding account to help accomplish this goal. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. This legislation was amended again in 2013 to open the program to all native fish species (statute section 87-1-283). The program now calls for the enhancement of native fish through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the FFIP.

The FFIP tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward a project that would install riparian fencing, a water gap, and off-stream water on or near Williams Creek. The goal is to improve fish habitat through riparian growth, reduced sedimentation, and overall stream health. Because riparian fencing is covered under a categorical exclusion, this analysis will address the water gap and off-stream water.

I. Location of Project:

This project will be conducted on Williams Creek, a tributary to Big Otter Creek near Raynesford in Judith Basin County. It is located within Township 17N, Range 8E, Sections 3 in Judith Basin County (Figure 1).

II. Need for the Project:

One goal within FWP's Statewide Fisheries Management Plan for the fisheries management program is to "restore and enhance degraded fisheries habitats." By implementing an improvement project and restoring important habitat, this proposed project would help meet this goal. This project would minimize the effect of livestock on Williams Creek by keeping livestock off the stream and riparian areas, except for specific areas where drinking water can be accessed. This project would also affect Big Otter Creek, immediately downstream, which is a popular recreational fishery for Brown Trout, Rainbow Trout, and Brook Trout.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to install a water gap and off-stream water. The overall goal is to improve habitat through reduced sedimentation, reduced temperature, and increased riparian growth. This project is expected to cost $18,340. Of this total, the FFIP would be contributing up to $9,220 to complete the project. The remaining funds are considered matching contributions and include the following funds:

Contributor	In-kind services	In-kind cash
Landowner	$4,368	$9,120
Total contributions: $9,120		

IV. Environmental Impact Review Checklist:

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment

Project Title: Williams Creek riparian fencing
Division/Bureau: Fisheries Division / Habitat Bureau (FFIP)
Description of Project: This project would install riparian fencing, a water gap, and off-stream water. The goal is to improve fish habitat through riparian growth, reduced sedimentation, and overall stream health. Because riparian fencing is covered under a categorical exclusion, this analysis will address the water gap and off-stream water.

A. POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture				X		
2. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		
3. Water quality, quantity and distribution (surface or groundwater)			X			X
4. Existing water right or reservation				X		
5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality			X			X
6. Unique, endangered, or fragile vegetative species				X		
7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats			X			X
8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species				X		
9. Introduction of new species into an area				X		
10. Changes to abundance or movement of species			X			X

B. POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Noise and/or electrical effects				X		
2. Land use				X		
3. Risk and/or health hazards				X		
4. Community impact				X		
5. Public services/taxes/utilities				X		
6. Potential revenue and/or project maintenance costs				X		
7. Aesthetics and recreation				X		
8. Cultural and historic resources				X		X
9. Evaluation of significance				X		
10. Generate public controversy				X		

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

3. Water quantity, quality, and distribution.

No changes in streamflow would occur in Williams Creek as a result of the proposed project. The only instream work that will be completed is the installation of the water gap, which should have minimal effect on water quality. To minimize turbidity, operation of equipment in the stream channel will be minimized to the extent practicable. A 318 authorization will be obtained, if necessary, to meet short-term water quality standards. Long term, the project is expected to improve water quality through reduced impacts from livestock.

5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

A water gap and in-stream water are improvements meant to provide water to livestock while decreasing the impact on the entire riparian area. Although vegetation cover, quantity, and quality may not be improved in the specific areas where livestock will congregate to drink, the overall riparian area will improve as the majority of it will be excluded from livestock use. Overall, and long term, vegetation is expected to improve.

7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats.

Reducing sediment inputs into Williams Creek and increasing vegetative cover, which is expected to improve water quality, may increase aquatic life and habitat through more suitable spawning and rearing areas for fish, improved stream health, decreased temperature, and improved habitat conditions for invertebrate prey species.

10. Changes to abundance or movement of species.

Improvements to water quality and aquatic habitat has the potential to improve survival and recruitment of fish populations, which could increase the abundance of fish.

VI. Explanation of Impacts to the Human Environment

8. Cultural and historic resources.

No cultural or historical resource impacts are anticipated. However, the State Historical Preservation Office will be notified of the project, and any potential concerns will be addressed.

VII. Narrative Evaluation and Comment.

There are no anticipated cumulative effects.

VIII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative.

If no funding is provided through the FFIP, either the applicant would have to seek additional sources of funding to complete the project, or the affected area of Williams Creek would continue to be impacted by livestock and degraded habitat.

2. The Proposed Alternative.

The proposed alternative intends to provide partial funding through the FFIP to restore the stream and riparian area of Williams Creek.

IX. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section.

1. Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction:

Judith Basin Conservation District

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

None.

3. Is an EIS required?

No. We conclude, from this review, that the proposed activities will have an overall positive impact on the physical and human environment, and will therefore not require the extensive analysis associated with an EIS.

4. Level of public involvement.

The project application to the FFIP has been posted on the FWP webpage for public comment. No comments have been received to date. The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the FFIP. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish & Wildlife Commission, and funding will be contingent upon their approval. The EA will be distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter and will be published on the FWP webpage: **www.fwp.mt.gov**.

5. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 11:59 PM on February 12, 2017.

6. Person(s) responsible for preparing the EA.

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FIGURE 1: project location